

1950 the service provider's state of availability back to "On Call" and immediately available. If the customer does accept the telephone call, the controller computer 300 will link the customer and service provider's telephone calls and begin the telephone call timer 1970 for billing purposes. If the telephone call has not been concluded when only a
 5 minute's worth of time is remaining on the customer account (based on the rate charged by the service provider), the controller computer 300 will check 1980 to see if the customer has increased his or her credit or purchased additional time. If the customer has not increased his or her credit or purchased additional time, the controller computer 300 will play a message 1990 for the customer requesting additional credit or payment before the call is
 10 terminated. Upon completion of the telephone call between the service provider and the customer, the controller computer 300 will disconnect 2000 the service provider from the customer. The controller computer 300 will play a message 2010 for the service provider to thank the service provider and provide a summary of the transaction. The controller computer 300 will play a message 2020 for the customer to thank the customer and prompt
 15 the customer to evaluate the services provided. After the evaluation has been provided, the controller computer 300 will record 2030 the information in the service provider's profile. The controller computer 300 will then record a summary of the transaction in the database 310 maintained on the controller computer 300 and update 2040 the customer's data accordingly. The controller computer 300 will then switch 2050 the service provider's state
 20 of availability back to "On Call" and immediately available. The controller computer 300 will then send 2060 summary messages via electronic mail to both the service provider and the customer.

What is claimed is:

- 25 1. A system of matching customers and service providers, facilitating communications between said customers and service providers, and keeping track of said communications for billing purposes, the system comprising:
- a communications link between a customer computer and a controller computer, said communications link providing the customer computer with access to a database maintained
 30 on the controller computer, said database generating and transmitting to the customer computer a list of service providers corresponding to search criteria provided by said customer computer;
- said list of service providers comprising each listed service provider's present state of availability for purposes of providing one-to-one, voice-based services;
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said controller computer responding to said customer's selection of a service provider from said list of service providers by initiating a communications link between said customer and said selected service provider;

5 said controller computer changing said selected service provider's said present state of availability to reflect when said communications link is initiated and to reflect when said communications link is terminated;

said controller computer tracking the length of time during which said communications link between said customer and said service provider is maintained; and

10 said controller computer billing process to secure payment from said customer for maintaining said communications link on a per unit of time basis.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein said communications link between a customer computer and said controller computer can be established by said customer computer interacting with said controller computer through a computer network.

15 3. The system of claim 1, wherein said communications link between a customer computer and said controller computer can be established by said customer computer interacting with said controller computer through a direct connection with said controller computer.

20 4. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to create said list of service providers by conducting a keyword search.

25 5. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to create said list of service providers grouped according to the service provided.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to sort and display said list of service providers according to their state of availability.

30 7. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to sort and display said list of service providers according to the price charged by said service providers.

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8. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to sort and display said list of service providers according to each of said service provider's customer evaluations.
- 5 9. The system of claim 1, wherein said customers can direct the manner in which said controller computer will sort and display said list of service providers.
- 10 10. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can select the manner in which said controller computer will sort and display said list of service providers
11. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to indicate and display each of said service provider's state of availability by color.
12. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to indicate and display each of said service provider's state of availability by geometric shapes.
13. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to indicate and display each of said service provider's state of availability by text messages.
- 20 14. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit said service providers to have one or more of several states of availability.
- 25 15. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit said service providers to have a separate and different state of availability for each service provided.
16. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit said service providers to select a state of availability for each registered service.
- 30 17. The system of claim 16, wherein said controller computer can be directed to require that each of said service providers submit to said controller computer a password before said controller computer will allow each of said service providers to direct said controller computer to update each of said service provider's state of availability.

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18. The system of claim 16, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit each of said service providers to update each of said service provider's state of availability through a direct telephone connection with the controller computer.
- 5 19. The system of claim 16, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit each of said service providers to update each of said service provider's state of availability through a computer network connection with the controller computer.
20. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to update
10 each of said service providers' state of availability based on each of said service provider's use of the system.
21. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit
15 each of said service providers to set the rate at which each of said service provider's customers are charged for said length of time said communications link is maintained.
22. The system of claim 21, wherein said controller computer can be directed to permit each of said service providers to set a separate rate at which each of said service provider's customers are charged for said length of time said communications link is maintained for
20 each type of service provided.
23. The system of claim 1, wherein said communications link between said customer and said selected service provider comprises a connection between a communications device associated with said selected service provider and a communications device
25 associated with said customer.
24. The system of claim 23, wherein said communications device comprises a telephone.
- 30 25. The system of claim 23, wherein said communications device comprises an interactive television.
26. The system of claim 23, wherein said communications device comprises a wireless radio receiver and transmitter.

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27. The system of claim 1, wherein once a service provider is selected from said list of service providers, said controller computer is directed to set up, initiate, confirm, and track said communications link between said customer and said selected service provider.

5 28. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer initiates a telephone connection with said selected service provider to establish said communications link.

29. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer can initiate a telephone connection with said customer to establish said communications link.

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30. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer can initiate a telephone connection with an intermediate party to establish said communications link with said customer.

15 31. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer will notify either said customer or said service provider prior to terminating the attempted said communications link if the other party to said communication link cannot be contacted.

20 32. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer will convey to each party of said communications link the length of time spent maintaining said communications link at the conclusion of said communications link.

25 33. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer will convey to each party to said communications link the cost of maintaining said communications link at the conclusion of said communications link.

34. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer can be directed to credit a customer account for advance payments received in connection with said customer account.

30 35. The system of claim 34, wherein said controller computer can be directed to interrupt said communications link should the prepaid amount relating to said customer account fall to a preset minimum level and to request that said customer provide additional payment for said account or, in the event payment is not received within a preset time period, to terminate said communications link.

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36. The system of claim 27, wherein said controller computer can be directed to credit a customer account in advance for services provided by said service providers.

37. The system of claim 36, wherein said controller computer can be directed to interrupt said communications link should the cost of said communications link approach to within a preset amount of credit relating to said customer account and to request that said customer establish additional credit for said account or, in the event additional credit is not established within a preset time period, to terminate said communications link.

38. The system of claim 1, wherein said controller computer can be directed to request that said customer evaluate the services provided by said service provider following each of said communications links with said service provider.

39. The system of claim 1, wherein the customer will be able to send a message to said service providers who are not immediately available.

40. The system of claim 1, wherein said service providers must register their services with said controller computer before being made accessible by said customers.

41. The system of claim 40, wherein said service providers will be required to submit a title, description, and cost for each of said services provided.

42. The system of claim 1, wherein said customers must register with said controller computer before being able to access said service providers.

43. The system of claim 1, wherein said service providers may register to provide more than one type of service.

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